

The Birth of a Political Activist: A Comparison of Two South Korean Films

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Abstract

There exist a number of explanations for democratization. One of the most decisive causes of South Korea's recent democratization in 1987 was mass movements from below. The role of political activists is integral to movements. In this article, pointing out that the existing literature on democratization has paid little attention to the contribution of individual activists to social movements; I analyze how ordinary citizens are gradually transformed into political activists and democracy fighters. Specifically, I compare two South Korean films, Jeon Tae-il: A Single Spark (1995) and The Attorney (2013), in terms of what motivates common people to change into activists, the concrete process of the change, and the consequences of the change for subsequent political development.

Keywords

South Korea, Democratization, Political activists, Mass movements, Films.

Introduction

One of the most notable characteristics of South Korea's transition to democracy in 1987 was that it was caused by mass movements from below. The conspicuous role of social movements sets South Korea apart from many other countries in Southern Europe and Latin America that had been democratized earlier in the early 1980s. In those countries, democratization was mostly caused by negotiation and compromise between different types of political elite—most typically between military and civilian elites. Elite bargaining largely determined the nature and degree of democratization in those countries.

By contrast, South Korea's democratization was caused by long and strong mass movements organized and sustained by students, workers, activists, and political leaders. The mass movements against dictatorship and for democracy consistently played an important role in South Korea's democratization, exposing, and criticizing the illegitimacy of the authoritarian governments and demanding the recovery of or transition to democracy.

In South Korea's mass movements against authoritarianism and for democracy, political activists played an instrumental role, by identifying new issues, tapping into new sources of support, promoting solidarity, developing new visions, and proposing policy alternatives. Political activists designed, organized, led, managed, and innovated mass movements. They played critical roles in reinforcing and improving democracy campaigns.

In this article, I look into the process through which common individuals are transformed into political activists. How do those average citizens become movement leaders, political activists, and eventually democracy fighters? What motivates them to go through such transformation? What are the characteristics of such a transformative process? What are the legacies and consequences of their transformation? In an effort to answer these questions, I analyze two movies in South Korea: Jeon Tae-il: A Single Spark (1995) and The Attorney (2013). This article specifically proceeds as follows. In Section 2, I review the existing literature on democratization and point out that the

existing literature has not paid adequate attention to how political activists emerge to contribute to the democracy movement. In Section 3, I examine the two films in detail, describing how the two ordinary men, Jeon Tae-il and Song Woo-seok (modeled on Roh Moo-hyun), eventually change into heroic democracy fighters. In Section 4, I conduct a brief comparative analysis of the two films, focusing on motivations, processes, and consequences. In Section 5, I summarize the article and point to future research direction.

Democratization and Political Activists

There have been different explanations for democratization (Karl, 1990; Huntington, 1991). But most of the explanations, so far have focused on macro-level factors, such as international variables, economic development, elite interactions, and social movements.

The existing literature is first divided between those theories that emphasize international factors and those that emphasize domestic factors. Although there were some cases of democratic transition that were heavily affected by external factors, such as war, conquest, international sanction, or regional diffusion (Whitehead, 1996; Pridham, 1995), most of the democratic transitions in the recent decades were caused by domestic factors.

Of domestic factors, scholars have identified several different variables. Some have underscored socioeconomic development (Lipset, 1960; Diamond, 1992; Przeworski et al., 2000). Others have highlighted elite interactions (Higley and Richard, 1992; O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986). Still other analysts have emphasized social movement and mass mobilization from below (Bermeo, 1997; Collier and Mahoney, 1997). South Korean democratization belongs to the last category of explanations, because it was largely led and caused by the grand democracy alliance of student groups, labor unions, and religious organizations.

One of the limitations of the current literature on democratization is that scholars have mostly neglected the role of individual leaders and activists in initiating, sustaining, strengthening, and

changing mass movements. The actual mass movements are always planned and led by actual political activists. It is thus very important to analyze how those political activists and democracy fighters are born, what kind of experiences they have, and what finally make them change into courageous fighters. Most of the existing explanations so far stay at the macro level, not paying due attention to the individual dimension of democratization.

In this article, therefore, I ask the following questions. How do common citizens change into democracy fighters, struggling for labor rights and democracy, and protesting against a formidable dictatorship? What are their motivations? How can ordinary men and women have the courage to risk their careers, lives, and everything to fight for justice and democracy? What are the circumstances for such momentous change? The method I utilize in this article is to analyze and compare two South Korean films that are based on true stories of what happened in the country during the 1970s and 1980s.

Jeon Tae-il: A Single Spark (1995) and The Attorney (2013)

Jeon Tae-il: A Single Spark (1995) directed by Park Kwang-su
 Jeon Tae-il: A Single Spark is directed by Park Kwang-su, who is considered to have led a “New Wave” of South Korean cinema in the 1980s, with his efforts to develop dialogues between the (democratic) present and the (authoritarian) past. He directed a series of well-received movies during the post-democratic period in South Korea, such as Chilsu and Mansu (1988), They, Like Us (1990), The Berlin Report (1991), Want to Go to That Island (1993), Jeon Tae-il (1995), Lee Jae-su’s Rebellion (1999), etc. Through these films, he has asked questions such as: “What is history?,” “Is what matters the past or the memory?,” and “How does the past relate to the present?” He does not shy away from tackling seriously political topics including the National Division, long-term prisoners, imperialistic superpowers around the Korean peninsula, ideologies, labor disputes, and social movements. Jeon Tae-il is one of his most representative movies. For the film, he used a special method of fundraising. He funded some part of the production money through ordinary citizens’ contributions. More than 7000 citizens—many working men and women—contributed their money to the production of the movie, and their names scroll in the ending credits of the film. The movie was not a mega blockbuster—but it was neither a failure. It was a relative success, drawing 235,935 people in Seoul only (http://navercast.naver.com/contents.nhn?rid=9&contents_id=244).

The movie juxtaposes the present, circa 1975 (portrayed in color), and the past, circa 1971 (portrayed in black and white). The protagonist of the movie, Kim Young-su, is a recent law school graduate who is on the run because he is being chased by the police. He is writing a book on the intriguing suicide case of a worker who set himself on fire. Four years ago, a tailor at the Pyeonghwa Market named Jeon Tae-il set himself ablaze to death, shouting “Do not waste my death!” and “Abide by the Basic Labor Standards Act!” He was only 22 years old. This self-immolation stunned South Korean intellectuals such as Kim and shocked the whole South Korean society. But, the implications of Jeon’s suicide are neither fully understood nor fully appreciated—that is why Kim is writing a book on Jeon.

The movie then flashes back and forth between Kim’s present and Jeon’s past. The part about Jeon’s past elaborates on many pieces of episode that demonstrate how Jeon, starting as a humble and rather naïve novice worker at a sewing sweatshop at the Pyeonghwa Market, slowly changes into a believer in labor rights and eventually a political activist and democracy fighter.

The present—the year of 1975 in which Kim is reminiscing and writing about Jeon—is still under the highly repressive Yusin system. In 1972, Park Chung-hee, the authoritarian president of South Korea at the time, scrapped democratic elections and changed the political system to a highly authoritarian one, basically enabling himself to be elected to the presidency forever, to promulgate presidential emergency measures to suspend the Constitution at any time, and to appoint 1/3 of the legislature, to name but a few. Kim gradually realizes the condition in which Jeon was put in: The sociopolitical structure Jeon was pressed to fight was none other than the same structure Kim himself is supposed to protest and oppose—Park’s repressive dictatorship.

In the black-and-white “past” part of the movie, Jeon begins his career as an assistant to a tailor at the sweat shop. He spends his whole bus fare to buy food for his fellow workers, young female workers who usually stay hungry all day because they have no money. Because he spends up all his bus fare, Jeon usually has to run back home, often passing the curfew restriction at midnight. A series of cinematic fragments unquestionably show that labor conditions in South Korea in the early 1970s were extremely poor. A young female worker coughs out blood but did not receive adequate medical treatment and is sent home to die there. A lot of workers at the sweat shop have to work till very late at night. Sometimes, Jeon send the girls earlier by doing their work instead.

Jeon is from a very poor family and is not well educated. Once his father at a dinner table mentions “Labor Standards Act,” which is supposed to protect workers and guarantee acceptable labor conditions. The Act is all written in Chinese characters and composed of difficult jargons. So, Jeon strongly wishes that he had a university student friend who can read and interpret the law for him. Jeon slowly notices and is frustrated by the immense gap between what is stipulated in the law and what happens in his workplace in reality. The guarantee of labor rights, free Sundays, no overwork are all written in the law, but what is actually happening is poor and repressive labor conditions all around.

Jeon organizes a reading group with his fellow workers to study labor laws and to learn about workers’ rights. He visits a labor superintendent several times to appeal to her and to demand the government’s stronger compliance with the law and efforts to improve labor conditions. But the superintendent uses various bureaucratic tactics to fend off and delay Jeon’s pleas. Scenes of Jeon’s frustration are followed by a description of what happens in the present, in 1975, at Seoul National University. On May 22, 1975, a big gathering takes place at Seoul National University to commemorate Jeon Tae-il’s death, characterizing his death and another student activist’s death as a powerful legacy bequeathed to the student activists at the time.

The movie then flips back to the past to describe how Jeon, after quiet self-reflection at a mountainside cathedral and tough manual labor experience at a construction site, decides to serve as a “spark” for the furtherance of labor movement in the country. When he returns to the market, he once again passionately organizes and mobilizes his fellow workers. He also aggressively campaigns to disclose the abuses of employers and governmental neglect of its regulatory duty, by printing and distributing newsletters on the labor realities. He receives help from a reporter at *Kyunghyang Daily Newspaper*, who reports the poor labor conditions at the market. Greatly encouraged by the supportive newspaper, he disseminates copies of the newspaper to all his fellow workers and citizens in the streets and continues his labor movement with stronger vigor.

But, the bureaucrats and employers just pretend to heed the laborers’ demands. After several weeks, Jeon realizes that those in power have no willingness to honor their promises to improve labor conditions and respect labor rights. Their strategy is simply to ignore, disregard, delay, sabotage, repress, and threaten. Once the press gets disinterested, scornful bureaucrats tell Jeon and his fellow workers that they are unpatriotic for complaining about labor conditions and condescendingly tell them: “You could also get rich if you work harder.” Eventually, Jeon decides to burn the law book—and himself too. He looks at his family members attentively on the night before his suicide. The next day, workers at the *Pyonghwa Market* organize a protest and run to the streets to fight with the police. Jeon douses himself with gasoline and slowly walks into the open, setting himself on fire. He shouts the slogan: “Abide by the Basic Labor Act” and “We are Human Beings, Not Machines.” Fellow protesters gather around him to attempt to extinguish the fire. A wave of mass movement mobilizations soon follow. His death mobilizes many other young workers, leading to the creation of unions powerful enough to get a hearing on the issue of workers’ rights in South Korea.

The Attorney (2013) directed by Yang Woo-seok

The Attorney was one of the mega hits in 2013, drawing staggering 11,373,450 people and ranking at the 10th in the entire history of South Korean cinema. The attorney, who is the protagonist of the movie, is modeled on a former South Korean president, Roh Moo-hyun, who had been a labor rights attorney before he was elected to the National Assembly in 1988 and eventually to the South Korean presidency in 2002. The movie is based on Roh’s true life story.

Song Woo-seok is a typical earthly lawyer who seeks to gain money and prosperity as fast as possible. He decides to be engaged in property and tax law, an area in which lawyers had disdained because they were too “low.” He tries his best to keep out of the growing democracy movement of the times. Song is an easygoing man, with a prosperous job, the love of his family, and his thriving relationships with those around him. One day, at a meeting with his high school alumni, Song has a fistfight with an old friend who is a local newspaper reporter. Song yells that anti-government demonstrations would never change the world, while his reporter friend points out that Song’s embarrassing obsession with money is perhaps due to his inferiority complex—that he couldn’t go on to college after his graduation from

high school. The reporter friend advises that Song should pay greater attention to what is going on in South Korea, obviously pointing to that there was an illegal military coup in 1979-80 and the leaders of the new military government were enforcing a series of measures to repress human rights and to terrorize the entire society. Song insists that the world is not so simple to be improved by demonstrations and protests. In a conversation with the son of the restaurant after the brawl, Song obstinately insists that waging a protest is like an egg hitting a rock. But the youngster, Jin-Woo, who is a university student, retorts: “But the rock is dead, while the egg is alive.”

The second half of the movie makes a big contrast with the first half, showing the great transition Song makes from a worldly money-seeker. When the son of the small restaurant he frequents is arrested and tortured as a suspected communist, his life gets completely changed. He transforms himself into an activist and fighter to expose the corrupt laws and responsible officials. The arrested student, Jin-woo, was just a typical university student who is social-minded and passionate about political issues. He taught at night schools and read social science books with friends, as many South Korean university students also did in the 1970s and 1980s. However, the authorities, intending to prevent and preempt anti-government activities in Busan, wanted to have—or fabricate in fact—a “big communist scandal.”

The big scandal the authorities fabricated in September 1981 was named the “Burim Incident,” involving 22 students, teachers, and workers who had run a social science reading club. They incarcerated them without arrest warrants and tortured them for 20-63 days to make them confess that they were communists. Prosecutors and the police were deeply involved in the torture and coerced confessions. The twenty-two people were prosecuted on charges of violating various laws, including the National Security Law.

Song Woo-seok was obviously very reluctant to take Jin-woo’s case, trying to maintain his easy life and to avoid troubles. But, he was compassionate enough not to decline the repeated pleas from the mother of the student in trouble. Between a prosperous and stable future as a tax lawyer affiliated with one of the biggest law firms in Korea and a lone fighter for a bunch of university students who are suspected communists, he finally chose the latter, chiefly out of his sympathy with the victims and anger toward judicial injustice. Initially, Song just intends to help the mother meet her son who was kidnapped and illegally incarcerated by the authorities. But at the meeting, Song finds out that Jin-woo was brutally tortured and coerced to admit all his allegations. Song determines to defend the student and his friends.

At the court, Song delivers a row of powerful defenses on behalf of the defendants, arguing, for example, that the books they read were not communist at all. Song cogently demonstrates that one of the “communist” books the students allegedly read, *What is History?* Is not written by a Soviet communist but by a British diplomat who stayed in the Soviet Union for some time. Song submits an official written letter from the British Embassy in Seoul to the effect that Edward Hallett Carr, the “communist” author according to the South Korean prosecutors, is a respected

British citizen, patriot, and public official and the British government is very delighted and proud to discover that Carr's books are still being widely read by South Korean university students. As for other "communist" books the prosecutor's office alleges that the "communist" students read, Song powerfully elucidates that the books are merely social science books that intend to analyze the South Korean society in a more balanced and objective way.

While defending the students, Song undergoes his own persecution and ordeal. He is severely beaten by an ultraright policeman who believes that there really exist communists in the South Korean society who secretly seek to overthrow the government according to the directions and instructions from the North. He believes that he is a true patriot who defends the Republic of Korea that is still technically at war with the communist North. This policeman is obviously not very happy with the communist-helping attorney, Song, and beats and threatens him.

Despite Song's passionate defenses, he does not win the case. All the defendants are sentenced to 5-7 years of imprisonment. Repeated arguments by the defendants and lawyers about the illegal arrests, imprisonments, and tortures are not accepted. However, most of the defendants are released 2 years later in August 1983 and emerge as important leaders of the democracy movement in the Busan region, which significantly contributes to South Korea's democracy movement in June of 1987. The defendants and victims of the actual Burim incident filed a lawsuit after the democratization. Part of the charges—violations of the Martial Law and Assembly Laws—were found flawed in 2009. And they are still fighting to annul the charges regarding the National Security Law.

The Attorney ends with an inspiring and moving scene in which Song, a tax attorney-turned-democracy fighter, sits in a courtroom as a defendant himself who violated the Assembly Laws by leading anti-government protests and is being cheered by 99 fellow lawyers in the Busan area. He is no longer alone in his fight for justice and democracy—he is now respected and supported by a number of like-minded fellow activists and citizens who will also struggle for justice and democracy in South Korea.

The Attorney was a great success, particularly because the actual person on which the main protagonist of the movie, Mr. Song, was modeled was Roh Moo-Hyun, a former president of South Korea, who had a very rocky political and presidential career and committed suicide in May 2009 after prosecutorial investigation into his and his family's corruption allegations. Combined with the disillusionment with the incumbent conservative government in late 2013, the movie turned out to be a huge success, revoking strong nostalgia for the 1980s and the Roh Moo-Hyun era and reminding the South Korean people of the importance of justice and democracy.

A Comparison

The two movies, Jeon Tae-il and The Attorney, show effectively how an ordinary man gradually changes into a political activist, democracy fighter, and historic hero. They can be compared in three different dimensions.

The first dimension is the motivational one. How do the two men, Jeon and Song (Roh hereinafter), get motivated to go beyond their individual petty interests and transformed into public figures dedicated to greater causes and collective interests? The strongest basis for both Jeon and Roh's action is compassion. Jeon has profound sympathy toward his fellow workers, particularly young girls who gave up their education, migrated from the rural area to Seoul, and had to go through tremendous hardship to earn money and support the family. Roh also feels profound sympathy for the small restaurant owner, who always reminded him of his mother and took good care of him while he was still a poor student preparing for the bar exam. When her son is in trouble, and when she repeatedly begs for Roh's help, he cannot refuse. One of the important commonalities between those Jeon helps (i.e., young workers) and those Roh helps (the son of a very humble restaurant owner) is that both are arguably the poorest and most vulnerable group of South Korean society at the time. Both Jeon and Roh pay their attention to the weakest part of the South Korean population and willingly decide to help them with what they already have. They determine to forgo their calculations about their own personal career and future and to help the less fortunate. This compassion for the weak constitutes the motivation of both Jeon and Roh.

The second is the processual dimension. The two movies elaborate on how the two worldly individuals gradually overcome their narrow-mindedness and become seriously interested in something bigger such as labor rights and democracy. This transformative process consists of several elements. Most of all, the process involves a lot of human relationships. They gather information from other people. They are inspired by other people. They are supported and encouraged by other people. In the case of Jeon, it is his father who lets him know that there are labor laws but they are neither complied nor implemented. In the case of Roh, it is the reporter friend who helps him realize that he cannot simply turn his face away from the harsh realities of his fellow citizens. We are all connected. In the beginning, Jeon was just an ordinary, innocent worker in the sweat shop. Roh was just a very materialistic lawyer only interested in making more money. However, because of their compassion for the more vulnerable, they slowly change themselves and become interested in what they can and should do to redress the existing injustice in South Korea's social, political, and economic system. Both Jeon and Roh take a "structural" approach, pointing out that the South Korean system as a whole has a problem. Jeon finds fault with the growth first industrialization policy of Park Chung-hee's developmental state. Roh criticizes the judicial system that is neither able nor willing to judge independently and that, as a result, has been reduced to a puppet of the authoritarian government. They attribute the cause of the plight of the poorest and weakest part of the South Korean population to those systemic injustices and focus on rectifying them through their powerful demand for justice and their alliance with fellow workers and activists. Through this process of firm determination and strong solidarity, both Jeon and Roh emerge as strong warriors for democracy.

The third is the consequential dimension. This is regarding the consequences and legacies of political activists' struggles. Jeon Tae-il had a tremendous impact on the subsequent series

of democracy movement against Park Chung-Hee's and Chun Doo-Hwan's dictatorial governments. Jeon's self-immolation galvanized particularly the alliance between students and workers. Jeon, when he was alive, always lamented that he did not have any "educated" friends. After his death, many students continued the tradition of teaching younger workers at night schools. Some students even dropped out of their schools to become laborers themselves. The closer and tighter alliance and cooperation between students and workers became one of the most important features of the democracy movement in the 1970s. Meanwhile, Roh's defense of those defendants involved in the Burim Incident also had significant consequences. As a result of the high-profile lawsuit, he became intensely interested in the oppositional politics of social movements, protesting the abuses of power by Chun Doo-Hwan's authoritarian government. The victims of the Burim Incident, when they were released a few years later, became the backbone of the democracy movement in the Busan area, and Roh himself became one of the prominent leaders of the movement. Roh's entry into the National Assembly in 1988 and eventual rise to the South Korean presidency in 2002 left tremendous imprint on South Korean politics. Roh's maverick style and straight talk greatly surprised South Korean citizens. Many South Koreans still remember him as one of the most accessible and relatable presidents in South Korea's history. As well, the values he emphasized, such as citizen-orientedness, participation, innovation, decentralization, and local autonomy, still resonate strongly as important guiding principles of South Korean democracy. In sum, both Jeon's and Roh's actions had strong effects, stimulating greater and stronger mobilization in the later phases of South Korea's democratization.

Summary and Conclusion

In this article, I examined how political activists were born and nurtured in the history of South Korean democratization, through a comparative analysis of two films: Jeon Tae-il and The Attorney. There exist various explanations for democratization, such as the external vs. internal variables, elite versus mass variables. However, so far, the individual transformation through which an ordinary person becomes an activist, fighter, and the hero has not been adequately researched and analyzed. In this article, I probed the process in which democracy fighters emerge and grow, through a detailed description of two South Korean films and a comparative analysis of them in the motivational, processural, and consequential dimensions. Both similarities and differences exist between the two films in terms of their depictions of the various ways in which ordinary citizens are reborn into political activists.

One limitation of this article is that I used films instead of real interviews to analyze how individuals gain their political

consciousness and decide to contribute to political change. Future research should attempt interviews with real activists and fighters to conduct in-depth qualitative analysis of the contribution of individual activists to the macro-level democratic change in South Korean politics.

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